

Ashdod Closings Worry Neighbors

By KEITH L. MARTIN

Late last summer, Forest Street resident Ronan Ryan was on his way home when he noticed a lack of activity at the Ashdod Fire Station. As he drove closer, he noticed a piece of paper on the door and pulled into the parking lot to inspect what was going on.

It was after reading three little words that Ryan became concerned: "Fire Station Closed."

While the sign did direct people to the central fire station

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While there was money to renovate Ashdod four years ago, current fiscal restraints are keeping it from being staffed full-time.

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on Tremont Street, Ryan first wondered what would occur in the event of an emergency in the Ashdod section of town and secondly, how many people knew what a plain white sheet of paper had just told him.

"A lot of people in the Ashdod district didn't know about the station being closed and I don't think a lot of people in Duxbury realize how this closure impacts the entire town," he said. "This issue is real and there has been little awareness until now."

While the paper sign has recently been replaced with a larger wooden sign outside the station, not much else at Ashdod has changed.

Currently, the fire department staffs three firefighters at Tremont St. and two at Ashdod during the day. However, in the event that one staff member is not at work that day due to sickness or vacation, the Ashdod station is closed from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. and the remaining four personnel are all located at the central fire station. During nights, however, Ashdod is always staffed.



"When Ashdod is closed, it affects the whole town," says Ronan Ryan of the West Duxbury Neighborhood Association.

According to Ryan, for fiscal year 2004, the station was closed for 100 days with another 45-50 projected closures before July. Projections for FY05 show that the station will be closed for 200 days if the proposed one percent cut proposed by the town takes effect, he said.

Since his discovery last year, Ryan has rallied the North Duxbury Residents Association to take action in making residents not only of the Ashdod area but the whole town aware of the impact created by the unmanned station.

Currently, 31 households strong, the association and Ryan have met with town officials to ensure the station is not closed completely and keep citizens aware of what is happening.

"When Ashdod is closed, it affects the whole town because if there is a call for this area, it is serviced by the central fire station," said Ryan,

who serves as the association's president. "That means that if there is another call on the opposite side of town, no one is around and the response time increases significantly."

Budget 'Tug of War'

Members of the association are not the only ones concerned with the dormant Ashdod, however, as both Duxbury firefighters and Chief William Harriman are also expressing their own discomfort in a move that dramatically affects their mission.

Harriman said he is fully aware, as are all department heads, of the difficult financial environment Duxbury and other towns are finding themselves in and that his agency is doing the best with what they have.

He said he has kept his promise to members of the association not to close Ashdod at night or when inclement weather would delay response time on town roads. In addition, on days the Ashdod station is closed, no open burning is allowed.

But as he works to keep the station open as many days as possible, he acknowledged that when it is closed, it is something he is fully aware of every hour of those shifts.

"When that station is closed, I think about it all day long," he said. "I'm in a [fiscal] box and have no way out. I have to do something to make the budget I have work."

While presenting a level budget for next year due to the constraints he and other departments are facing, Harriman said he is being torn between being fiscally responsible and living up to the responsibility he vowed to take when becoming chief.

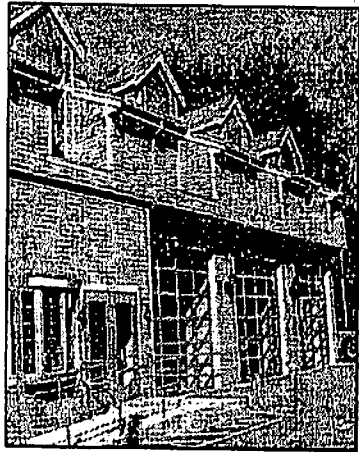
"I find myself being tugged dramatically between being a team player - which I have been for years - and being a strong advocate for public safety when it comes to the lives of citizens in this town," he said. "It's an awful tug of war to be in with yourself every day."

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In 2000, residents Tim and Paula Barry donated this cake to celebrate the reopening of Ashdod after 11 years of being closed. Photo by Paula Maxwell



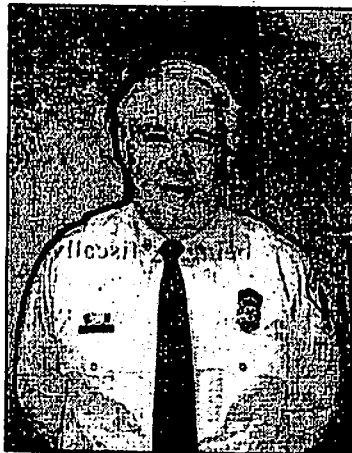
Ashdod Closings



Town Manager Rocco Longo said that he too would like to see Ashdod staffed full-time, but credits Harriman and his staff with doing their best to keep the town safe in tough fiscal times.

"All services are taking a hit and I went to the chief and asked what he needed and gave him that number," said Longo. "No one wanted to close this station, but we had to find some areas where we could provide services with minimal impact."

Longo said that during the 11-year period the station was



closed due to fiscal constraints before reopening in 2000, the department did a great job at responding and will continue to with it being staffed part-time. He added that he does not feel good about any of the cuts that all town departments are taking for next year, but that everyone will work together to maintain quality services for citizens.

"We'll do the best we are able to do," said Longo. "Would it be easier if [Ashdod] were open all the time? Absolutely. Would I feel better? Absolutely. The money cut from schools was significant, for example. Do I feel good about that? Absolutely not."

Bigger Budget Picture

Harriman said that while he realizes the difficult fiscal situation the town and all its departments are in, his first concern and that of the town should be public safety.

"I am absolutely concerned about the cuts to the fire department," he said. "The [proposed] cuts on top of the FY04 will cripple this department."

With his retirement coming this May, Harriman said he is concerned with how the department will fare under his successor.

"I am the consummate team player and would never take [money] from anyone else — that's not my style," he said. "But unfortunately, what is going to happen is that the new chief will have an FY05 budget that is unworkable."

In addition to added closures at Ashdod, Harriman said that the department is also losing a full-time deputy chief position. What most people may not realize, he said, is that when there are two or three ambulance calls at one time, Harriman or the deputy chief supplement manpower themselves.

"With [the deputy chief] position gone, he won't be able to do this," said Harriman. "And depending on who the next chief is, if he lives out of town, he may not be available to cover shifts."

Harriman said he has made

his feelings clear to Longo, but did not meet with selectmen regarding the FY05 budget. He added that it is also not his style to say that other departments in town don't need what they've requested so that there is money for his department instead.

"It's not my place to say that, but I do believe that public safety should be the highest priority," he said.

That feeling is being echoed by firefighters in town, who say they just want to be able to do their jobs responding to medical and fire calls to the best of their ability.

P. Hussey, president of the Duxbury Permanent Firefighters Association, Local Union 2167, said that by having Ashdod closed, response time to any emergency increases to the dissatisfaction of all town firefighters.

"We just want to do our jobs," said Hussey. "We took an oath of public safety and it is so frustrating when you know you can help, but can't be there to make a difference."

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— Chief William Harriman

Ashdod Concerns

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Hussey said decreasing the response time to the Ashdod district from a couple of minutes to up to ten minutes could become a matter of life and death and luckily, that has not yet occurred.

Union members said they hope that this will never become a reality and are hopeful that someone will come forward at Annual Town Meeting and request full funding for the department to keep Ashdod open 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Like Harriman, they believe it is not their place to suggest cuts in other departments for their own gain.

"People have to realize that this is a priority," said Lt. Peter Goggin. "Education is important and has given Duxbury residents the property values it has, but the fact is that if you, your son or your spouse needs an ambulance or a fire truck, that outweighs everything else."

Goggin added that the department received over 2000 calls last year and the majority of them were for medical response. By leaving Ashdod closed, he said citizens are taking a big risk in their own personal safety.

Goggin and other members of the union say they aren't calling for funding for everything the department needs, just enough to keep Ashdod staffed around the clock, a promise they say was made when the station was re-opened.

This is the same wish of Ryan and the Association, who plan to express their concerns with voters at Town

Meeting. Ryan said that through meetings with Longo, it will take \$50,000 to \$75,000 to staff Ashdod full-time.

While he recognizes that this money will need to be taken away from another department that is also struggling, Ryan said the impact is such that it affects the entire town.

"The reality is that most people in Duxbury consider public safety close to the top of their priority list and when the public safety of a particular part of town impacts the rest of its citizens, they should be aware of what's going on," said Ryan.

While he credits town officials from Longo to Harriman with being helpful and addressing the concerns of the association, Ryan simply wants everyone aware of the current situation and what it could mean in the future.

"I would hate to see something arise where we have a serious issue that leads to reversing [the closure]," he said. "Luckily, nothing has occurred yet."

For Longo, suggesting funding for one department will definitely hurt another, he said, and that funds may present themselves in the future to help the fire department.

"We've tried to accomplish [creating the budget] through consensus with all department heads and structured it in a way that is acceptable for everyone," he said. "If we can shift money after Town Meeting, the selectmen have made it clear that [public safety] is a priority."

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